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**Women Playwrights in Post-Apartheid South Africa:  
Yael Farber, Lara Foot-Newton, and the Call for *Ubuntu***

Yvette Hutchison

Described by Jane Taylor as a “founding theatrical event, a metaphysical ‘tournament of value,’”<sup>1</sup> South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) publically and performatively renegotiated memory and history, facilitated the hearing of specific stories related to apartheid in public, and attempted to redefine contemporary social values in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation. The TRC’s chairman, Desmond Tutu, suggested that this process could be achieved through *ubuntu*: the acknowledgement that “a person is a person through other persons,” which includes acknowledging that we are “diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”<sup>2</sup> *Ubuntu* is an African formulation of humanism and socialism which claims that humanity is defined by the degree to which we accord equal dignity and personhood to all people, regardless of class, race, gender, or status; we cannot be human separately from one another, we are connected, and what each of us does affects the world. In this analysis, I want to consider how South African playwrights Yael Farber and Lara Foot-Newton have contributed to the endeavor of negotiating *ubuntu* in a country comprised of diverse and divided people.

The TRC was an important water-shed for South Africa, but its mandate was specific and limited. Although the Commission carefully analyzed the “context in which conflict developed and gross violations of human rights occurred,”<sup>3</sup> it did not address the everyday brutalities of apartheid or deconstruct gender formulations and it only addressed institutional violence in special hearings. While it is important to acknowledge that the Commission achieved much, not least the breaking of silences and acknowledgement of the realities of apartheid, it is also important that it not be perceived as having dealt with or resolved all

South Africa's issues with its past. Plays like Jane Taylor's *Ubu and the Truth Commission*,<sup>4</sup> the Kuhlmani Support Group's *The Story I'm About to Tell*,<sup>5</sup> and Antje Krog's *Waarom is die Wat Voor Toyi-Toyi Altyd so Vet?* (Why are those who toyi-toyi in front always so fat?)<sup>6</sup> demonstrate the degree to which individuals and the society as a whole are still haunted by the past, as well as the significant role theatre continues to play in confronting it.

In 1999, Temple Hauptfleisch pointed out that women have profoundly influenced the shape of South African theatre, but that "most of these women operated mainly in the private and commercial world, for . . . the state-funded theatre organizations have hardly ever allowed women into prominent positions of power. Thus these women were used, their creativity tapped—but their control of the system limited."<sup>7</sup> To some extent, this situation was due to the fact that theatre was perceived as a public and political space in which primarily men spoke and protested against apartheid, with women in supporting roles. Post-apartheid South African theatre has shifted away from almost exclusively male-centred and male-authored plays to include more female voices.<sup>8</sup> This shift in the theatre aligns with a larger shift in South African politics.

Women have profoundly influenced the nation's transition to democracy, entering parliament in large numbers, playing important roles in defining one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, and becoming involved in large-scale law reform that "has managed to create very women friendly legislation to promote gender equality."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, South Africa has been challenged by the need to build a nation from the extreme racialization of apartheid, high levels of gender violence, and one of the highest increases of HIV/AIDS infections in the world, with varying levels of poverty among at least 40 percent of the population. The paradoxes of the "new" South Africa are exemplified in the fact that it has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, but also "the worst known figures for gender-based violence for a country not at war."<sup>10</sup> The gap between the constitutional and

legislative prohibitions against discrimination and the lived reality of many people in South Africa is significant.

Corlann Gee Bush has argued that the great strength of women's movements, and feminism, has been the "twin abilities to unthink the sources of oppression and to use this analysis to create a new synthesizing vision."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, considerable "unthinking" needs to occur in order to "create a new synthesizing vision" for all in South Africa. As South African theatre has shifted from a socio-political context in which "it was almost considered politically incorrect to depict the personal because it somehow seemed to detract from larger political issues" to one in which individuals can "write plays that are dealing with real community issues and communities made up of people,"<sup>12</sup> women playwrights are playing a key role in the "unthinking" and re-visioning process. In what follows, I will consider how playwrights Farber and Foot-Newton have used theatre to expand on the TRC process, to encourage ongoing public engagement with diverse, ubiquitous, and often disavowed stories, and to thereby propose new ways for South Africans to interact.

### **Yael Farber: Facilitating Empathetic Engagement with the Past**

Farber is an award-winning South African director and playwright who has written three testimonial plays in collaboration with the original performers whose lives they represented: *A Woman in Waiting* (1999), *Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise* (2002), *He Left Quietly* (2003), and *Molora* (2007),<sup>13</sup> which draws on the framework of *The Oresteia* to explore the TRC from the perspective of "the common everyman and everywoman,"<sup>14</sup> here represented by the Ngqoko cultural group of the Transkei. In each of these plays, Farber explored the experiences and memories of the performers, which she then reworked into a text that was performed by the performer-testifiers back to their own communities in the first

instance and to wider audiences later. This process transformed personal narratives beyond specific experiences to reach people who had not necessarily shared such experiences or engaged with such stories. The process thus extended the embodied recounting of memory begun at the TRC, combining South Africa's workshop tradition with processes of community theatre and thereby facilitating ongoing engagement with the past while providing a methodology for processing the trauma of individuals and engaging diverse communities in and beyond South Africa.

The first play, *A Woman in Waiting*, traces actress Thembi Mtshali-Jones's memories of being separated from her parents as a child because they worked in the city and of how later, when she lived with her mother, she was "hardly ever home—working day and night in the 'kitchens'" (54). Later, the cycle repeats itself as Thembi must herself leave her baby in order to go to work. The everyday horror of apartheid is communicated in her memory of Mr. Boss's outrage at her using his toilet, and her mother's humiliation is dramatized when the "large suspended dress" that is used in the play to represent her "starts to droop and slowly crumples to the ground" (58). Another powerfully evocative image is that of Thembi's mother's annual gift of shoes, which are always too small because she has measured the child's feet a year ago, to suggest how much of the child's life the mother has missed while caring for other peoples' children. This image may evoke memories of audience members' children's first shoes, and perhaps the contemplation of what it would mean to be away from a child for an extended period of time.

Farber's second play, *Amajuba*, was the result of a commission by the North West Arts Council to work with the Council's five resident actors to create a piece "culled from the lives of the cast, lived in the shadow of Apartheid's dying years."<sup>15</sup> In this play, Tshallo Chokwe, Roelf Matlala, Bongeka Mpongwana, Phillip 'Tipo' Tindisa, and Jabulile Tshabalala tell their stories, which Farber describes as being "five 'small' stories from the

millions untold.”<sup>16</sup> Bongi recalls being abandoned in an abjectly poor community with her alcoholic but beloved grandfather and suffering constant hunger and despair. Roelf’s experiences of racist abuse in Soweto and the Pedi community in Pietersberg because he is of mixed race highlights the effect of apartheid upon all South Africans, resulting in oppressed people discriminating against other marginal groups because of their race or ethnicity. Tipo explores the personal effects of forced removals on his family, which led to his father abandoning the family and Tipo becoming embroiled in the resistance movement, where he “saw things . . . that kids shouldn’t see” (146). Jabulile explores the ubiquitous violence of life in the townships, where her cousin was killed by a stray bullet; she herself had to leave her home and family when a gang threatened to rape her. Tshallo’s story juxtaposes his dream of escaping poverty by becoming a soccer star with the realities of his experiences as a youth in the struggle movement. Here again, Farber finds images to facilitate empathy for experiences that may be alien to many in the audience. For example, she helps us understand Tshallo’s experiences as a youth activist by citing his fear of the dark, which most people have experienced, and then recounting how now he is beyond fear. Such details highlight the cost of the struggle against apartheid in human terms, as well as the ongoing need to “look back” on the “years that shaped” youths like Tshallo (173). Notably, although *New York Times* reviewer Charles Isherwood praised the play generally, he suggested that some of these sentiments “skirt banality.”<sup>17</sup> Isherwood’s comment suggests that perhaps the need to “look back” can only really be understood by societies who have lived through extended periods of trauma, an idea supported by Adrienne Sichel when she overtly links remembering and healing in her review of the play.<sup>18</sup> Isherwood’s statement further suggests the significance of the banal in relation to regimes of oppression. In the context of remembering trauma, Hannah Arendt remarked that Adolf Eichmann’s testimony reflected neither guilt nor hatred, and that “the grotesque silliness of his last words” summed up the “banality of evil.”<sup>19</sup> In *Amajuba*,

Farber dramatizes the everyday evils of apartheid policies that were experienced by the majority of South Africans but that were not acknowledged in the TRC hearings.

Farber's play *He Left Quietly* is based on the experiences of Duma Kumalo, who was sentenced to death in 1984 on a false charge of taking part in the murder of a town councillor in Sharpeville. In March 1988, Kumalo had been measured for his coffin, had his final meeting with his father, and eaten his last meal when his sentence was deferred under international pressure. In *He Left Quietly*, he appears almost as a ghost. The play extends his thirty-minute testimony before the TRC and his performance in the Khulumani Support Group's production of *The Story I Am About to Tell* (2001) in order to juxtapose his personal trauma alongside questions of culpability, as demonstrated by the last performance of the play before an audience of judges and prosecutors, some of whom had been serving at the time of Kumalo's trial. *He Left Quietly* is constructed differently from the other two plays, although it draws on Kumalo's memories and he himself performed in it. Here, Farber created the characters of Young Duma, who enacts much of the narration, and a Woman who represents the white community. The title is drawn from Duma's experiences with teenage activist Lucky Payi, who helped him process his brother's death, read Peter Abrahams's *View from Coyaba* to him through the bars of his cell,<sup>20</sup> and "taught me how to face dying. . . . how to be free."<sup>21</sup> When it was Lucky's time to die, Duma says, "He left quietly" (223). The stories give faces and details to the unspeakable horrors of death row under apartheid. There is much emotion in the play, particularly concerning loss, which Farber again focuses through the central image of shoes. Throughout the play, Duma dreams about the shoes he bought just prior to his arrest, but at the end of the play, the shoes remain untouched and he gives them away, saying "I am no longer the man who once walked in those shoes. Give them to someone who has miles to go!" (236). The shoes remind us of the prison room full of the shoes that represent the "more than four and a half thousand people who were hanged" in

South Africa between 1910 and 1989 (213), which in turn invokes images of the piles of shoes remaining after the Jewish Holocaust. They also call for us to stand metaphorically in Kumalo's shoes and answer the same charge of complicity "by the Law of Common Purpose," which requires that we acknowledge that "we all conspired in that man's death," and that, by extension, we must all bear responsibility for South Africa's past (209, 225). Critic Fintan O'Toole stated of the performance that "Kumalo's own presence as narrator and actor takes the piece far beyond the realms of artistic imagery. It is inescapably real." In O'Toole's words, "Farber has given it the deliberation and distance of a ritual," resulting in a piece that "becomes almost literally haunting."<sup>22</sup> Active engagement on the part of the audience is crucial to the efficacy of Farber's plays, as is dramatized in Duma's first encounter with the Woman, who "sits inconspicuously in the audience":

Duma: Where is home—if you are just here to watch? What country are you running to – if you are just a bystander here? . . . A guest . . .

Woman: I'm not running . . .

Duma: You are in or you are out. (190-91)

Much later, the Woman asks, "What we do with such knowledge?" Duma replies, "This is our history. We all come from this broken place. Either you are in or you are out. But if you choose to be in—you must partake" (234).

Mark Sanders has noted that applicants' requests to the TRC were both material (for help to find the bodies of victims and for support for funeral rites) and psychological (for "mournful commemoration" or the "official and public acknowledgement" of personal loss and "a massive refusal to mourn the dead of others").<sup>23</sup> Farber's plays facilitate public acknowledgement of loss as audience members listen, empathize, and, according to Farber, heal themselves: "Without a listener who believes and empathizes with you, you are dislocated from—yet deeply shaped by—your own story. To own the events of one's life and



share these memories is to reclaim one's self and offer your community, your witnesses a collective possibility to do the same."<sup>24</sup>

While facilitating empathetic engagement, Farber simultaneously highlights complex issues relating to history and hegemony, as is evident in the narratives spoken in the performers' various mother tongues. Farber argues that "[t]here's a fundamental connection between the psyche of the country and the languages that people speak. The denigrating of indigenous languages through colonialism is a psychic violence."<sup>25</sup> Thus, the inclusion of mother-tongue narratives in the plays highlights this historic hegemony experientially as audience members may be temporarily unable to follow the narrative:

When the actor speaks in the vernacular, the actor is deep in their integrity, while the audience is momentarily an "outsider" who misses out. When the actor breaks from the vernacular, and returns to English—the audience no longer takes this for granted, but is aware that this storyteller is reaching out in a language imposed upon them—which is a profoundly generous act.<sup>26</sup>

This dramaturgical strategy simultaneously highlights the problems of the past while literally enacting a potential form of reconciliation, which audience members can reciprocate by listening empathetically and acknowledging their place relative to the narrative.

Farber's plays signal the need for ongoing mourning in South Africa and celebrate "the inexplicable hope that has continued to burn in South Africa's people."<sup>27</sup> Symbolic ritual and song are key to these processes. All the plays include songs and hymns, often to connect disparate stories and facilitate the communication of unspeakable experiences affectively. For example, at the end of *Amajuba*, the five performers acknowledge that they "cannot leave things in the dust without a decent burial. No matter how small." A symbolic ritual follows that signifies both a burial and a resurrection. Using biblical referents, the performers take handfuls of dust and chant "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" in their various languages, while

Tshallo makes the titular statement, “From the dust—Like doves . . . we will rise” (175-76).

The performers ritually wash, cleansing themselves of the past, and chant “We are like doves” (178) before reiterating their signature song and the theme taken from the title *Amajuba*, meaning *those who spring back or rebound*. The dove and water invoke the holy spirit at Christ’s baptism and resurrection, suggesting that the characters will rise above these painful memories as individuals and that the audience can share their hope.

Farber’s play *Molora* draws on Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Sophocles’ and Euripides’ versions of *Electra* to explore the paradoxical need for social stability through structured reconciliation in the face of embodied memories of past violence. As well, the play is framed by songs and rituals drawn from traditional Xhosa culture. After the women stop Elektra from perpetuating the cycle of violence, a Xhosa diviner ends the play by praying to the ancestors for help in the battle to stop crime and killing and in speaking truth. Here, Farber suggests that we must draw on whatever spiritual frame is appropriate to engage with and expiate individual and communal trauma and pain.

Many of the songs that Farber uses in her plays were included either in testimonies or in response to them at the TRC. Fiona Ross has argued that, rather than being forms of “aestheticising testimony,” these songs tapped into oral forms that were implicitly related to the liberation movement in South Africa and that, insofar as they were widely known, they “invited audiences to participate with them in the performances of memory and meaning, and drew audiences with them in the testimonial process.”<sup>28</sup> Songs aid affective engagement with narratives that audience members have not personally experienced and thereby facilitate empathy, which is crucial to *ubuntu*.<sup>29</sup>

South African playwright Peter Hayes stated in an interview about his 2009 play *Ncamisa*, about the brutal 2006 murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana by a group of young men because she was a lesbian,

To really effect political change, the amount of lobbying and activism needed is greater than what we can do in a play. I think what theatre can do is create a very intimate exchange. Prejudice arises from ignorance and fear and when you're sat in the theatre to hear an actor tell a true story—at some stage in that performance they will look you in the eye and it starts eroding the fear. That's as much as I can hope for in a play, that we can attack the prejudices. You can't hate somebody that you know.<sup>30</sup>

In Farber's work, the emphasis on persons telling their own stories calls for understanding and empathy for people whose histories and memories may be different from our own in a period of transition and socio-political reconstruction.<sup>31</sup> In this way, she calls both for understanding and for a co-operative revisioning of how individuals see and interact with one another, thus expanding on the work begun at the TRC.

### **Lara Foot-Newton: Challenging Cycles of Violence and Fear**

Foot-Newton has moved from being a director, producer, and adapter of other peoples' work to writing and directing her own plays. Her first play was *Tsephang: The Third Testament* (2003), which began in her garage, was first performed in a scout hall near Pretoria, and then moved to larger venues in South Africa, London, Amsterdam, and Ottawa. Since then, Foot-Newton has written *Karoo Moose* (2007) and *Reach!* (2007) and co-created a number of other plays. In her work, Foot-Newton challenges essentialist constructions of masculinity while facilitating her audiences' engagement with examples of violent experiences that are often unspeakable and disavowed in South Africa. In doing so, she suggests that there are many and complex reasons for violence, but that, in perceiving and engaging with them, we can begin to "unthink" the legacies of apartheid and imagine how to achieve *ubuntu* in South Africa.

*Tshepang* is based on the actual 2001 rape of a nine-month-old baby, Siesie, by her mother's lover, Alfred Sorrows. Siesie's nurses nicknamed her Tshepang (Hope) because her recovery from the consequent internal damage was miraculous. Foot-Newton wrote the play as part of her Master's degree at Witwatersrand University, after spending a year researching the story's socio-political and historical background with actor Bheki Vilakazi. Tshepang's story had a profound effect on South Africa: as Foot-Newton has stated, "Once the story of baby Tshepang hit the headlines, the scab was torn off a festering wound and hundreds of similar stories followed. Each story was equally horrific."<sup>32</sup> Her dedication specifying that the play is "based on twenty thousand true stories" refers to South Africa's annual statistic for child rape. The mind cannot engage with twenty-thousand such stories, so Foot-Newton uses this one to reflect upon what may lie behind equivalent acts of violence, asking what these acts mean for each individual in the audience and for the society as a whole.

One of the challenges of *Tshepang* is that its circumstances may seem to reinforce the sense that many destructive behaviors have become overwhelmingly associated with descriptions of masculinity in general and with the stereotype of African men as "violent sexual predators."<sup>33</sup> I argue, however, that one of Foot-Newton's distinctive contributions as a playwright is how she deconstructs essentialist approaches to masculinities in South Africa by contextualising destructive behavior within particular experiences of apartheid while also asking audiences how we can all contribute to changing these patterns.

*Tshepang* begins in the dark, with an insistent, rhythmic grinding sound. As the lights go up, we see Ruth, Siesie's mother, sitting with a pile of salt on some animal skins, rubbing the salt into the skins. She has a small bed tied to her back with a blanket. Her partner Simon, who is Alfred's cousin, sits next to her in front of a rusty steel bed and tells the entire story, acting all the characters with compassion and reminding both them and us of who they are and how they have come to be as they are. Ruth remains silent until the very end of the play.

Simon's first speech introduces the central issues of the play: the relentless heat, the fact that people "like to drink here," and the idea that "nothing ever happens here. Nothing. Niks."<sup>34</sup> This statement is repeated like a refrain throughout the play, suggesting an existential hopelessness and the reasons for it. The characters' sense of purposelessness, of drifting, is explained historically: for example, community member Trompie's "drinking vaalwyn [very poor wine]" (20) refers to the "dop" (drink) system, whereby labourers were paid with liquor rather than money, which perpetuated low self-esteem, domestic violence, and an inability to challenge injustices under apartheid. The consequence of this iniquitous economic practice is illustrated in the account of Trompie's ridiculous failed suicide attempts (21-22). Other examples of the community's plight include Tshepang's grandfather Dewaal, who sits and untangles fishing nets although he lives far from the sea and never goes fishing (23), and the policeman, who "smokes dagga [marijuana]" and "sits on his fat arse and does fokkol" (25). Foot-Newton uses comic irony to highlight the socio-psychic consequences of years of social, economic, and political oppression that have left these people without agency, seeking oblivion in wine, sex, sleep, or death.

It is significant that sex is included in this list of anodynes. In his introduction to *Tshepang*, Tony Hamburger notes that the descriptions of sexual encounters in the play are "presented as anonymous, indiscriminate and disconnected from human contact but associated with annihilation, oblivion";<sup>35</sup> as Simon says, "first you naai [fuck], then you die!" (32). Here, sexual encounters are not interpersonal encounters; women are merely human receptacles into which the men empty their mental anguish. Simon describes his and Alfred's sexual experiences with Sarah, whose brother sold her for five cents, while she got a comic and chewing gum: "[we] had to finish our business . . . before she had turned three pages of the comic. . . . if we didn't finish in time . . . her brother Petrus, for an extra two cents, would let us continue in half a loaf of white bread" (26). Here, Simon hardly differentiates between

the girl's body and the loaf of bread. This incident explains Sarah's lack of engagement with Tshepang's rape: we are told three times that she "did nothing when it happened. Just lit a match and walked out of the room" (20, 25, 42). The incident further suggests that both men and women have been brutalized by the socio-economic conditions of apartheid.

The view of women as functional objects that men use to meet their physical or psychological needs is exacerbated by the historical "houvrou" arrangement. As Simon explains, a "houvrou is a woman that you keep, but she's not your wife. But here it is better to have aouvrou, because you can't get rid of a wife. Aouvrou you can let go" (20). This arrangement highlights women's personal and economic vulnerability and to some extent explains why Ruth hesitated to tell the police that it was her boyfriend who raped her child, since, as Simon reveals, he was "[t]he one that brought her food and clothes. The one that brought her drink . . . She was too scared to tell them because she was hisouvrou" (42). It also explains Alfred: Simon recounts how Alfred was beaten almost to death by his father's "very youngouvrou called Margaret" when he was three years old, because he had wet himself laughing (28-29). Simon describes Alfred thereafter as "[n]either here nor there. Not good. Not bad. Very quiet. Like he was always remembering the time with the broom, and the broken bones" (34). This incident dramatizes the consequences of cycles of oppression: men brutalize young women, who fear being thrown away and so in turn hurt small children, who grow up and rape babies. The play does not ask us to sympathize with Alfred, but it does suggest that he is more than an aberration and that his action arose from extended and complex cycles of abuse and violence that have dehumanized both men and women.

The socio-economic background that frames *Tshepang*'s exploration of masculinity, sexuality, and gender relationships is signalled in the set design, where the bed, pile of salt, and a small-scale model of the town form a triangle around which the events are narrated. According to designer Gerhard Marx, "This 'small town' consists of a number of simple

houses arranged to resemble the stark grid of government housing projects. During the performance these houses are used to ‘enter’ the town, to establish the couple’s relationship with the town (far enough to be outside, close enough to observe).”<sup>36</sup> Such housing “grids” were created during apartheid to segregate by race and class and, as Steven Robins notes, they remain “firmly intact in the new South Africa.”<sup>37</sup> This situation suggests that, while racial policy has changed, the lived realities of many people have not. Thus, the personal domestic space on stage in *Tshepang*, and the events that occur within it, are connected spatially and historically to the wider socio-political context by the model of the town.

This stage space works in conjunction with the symbolic use of everyday objects to suggest the complex causes of the violence that characterises the wider society that is the context for the play’s action. Thus, the broom that is used to beat Alfred is used against a loaf of bread in Simon’s re-enactment of Siesie’s rape (42). Beds are emblematic of the trauma and violence that have destroyed Ruth’s life and deprived her of her child. There are three versions of this “burdened” object in the play: the literal bed, which Simon and Ruth cannot replace because they are so poor; the miniature bed that Ruth carries on her back in place of her absent child; and a miniature bed “found beneath one of the small houses”<sup>38</sup> when Simon narrates his discovery of Ruth’s self-mutilation and which he carries to hospital as a substitute for her body. Marx suggests that the bed “stands in stark contrast to the crib in which the baby Jesus lay,” an image evoked in the play “by Simon’s carvings of the nativity scene” as “an idealised image of the family structure, in dismal contrast to that into which baby Tshepang is born.”<sup>39</sup> These uses of everyday objects in the play bring together our awareness of rational causality with more affective responses invoked by the events associated with them in the play.

This greater sense of understanding may shift an audience away from an initial sense of clear outrage and horror, articulated in the play by the Johannesburg newspaper reporter Maureen de Witt, to appreciate Simon's response to de Witt's coverage of the rape:

Shame that you are so ugly, lady. Shame on you! Shame on all of you! Who do you think you are? Coming here and pointing your cameras and your accusations. Pointing your painted ugly fingers at us. Where were you, where were you? What are you doing here? Get out of here! Take your cameras and get out! This town was raped long ago. This town was fucking gang-raped a long, long, long, long time ago! Shame on us? Shame on you, shame on all of us! (40-41)

Hamburger's introduction to *Tshepang* raises questions regarding what playwrights intend when they engage audiences with unaccountable horrors:

Are the writers seeking to excuse the inexcusable? Are they suggesting that understanding can undo the social and personal ills? Are they offering to pardon infant rape and the rapist(s)? Their theatre puts us, the audience, in danger. The jeopardy is that our clarity about where evil resides, where to lay the blame, is threatened. The blurring of boundaries between good and evil troubles us. We can only condemn if we are free of guilt, collusion or association.<sup>40</sup>

In *Tshepang*, Foot-Newton argues that everyone—men and women alike—from this community and beyond is implicated by the socio-economic structures that have determined South African history and society. As Simon's response to Maureen de Witt makes clear, the play asks each person to analyze their part in this story and to consider what we need to “unthink” in order to change these patterns so that we can see people as people and thus realise a truly “new” South Africa.

Central to this shift is finding a position between condemnation and absolution. Simon's nativity carvings and the play's sub-title “*The Third Testament*” challenge the binary



images of an Old Testament god of vengeance and the New Testament depiction of Christ-like love and forgiveness. This “third testament” is a challenge to South Africans to find a way through the cycles of violence provoked by poverty and socio-political brutalities that have devalued people so that they do not see the humanity in other people, not even a child; all they want is oblivion. Yet although baby Tshepang is a provocation for people to acknowledge and break the cycles of violence, hope does not lie in her. Rather, it lies in Simon, who narrates the child’s mutilated body, Ruth’s distress, and the stories of the other people who have been brutalized by the past; who sculpts his nativity figures; and who assures Ruth that he “will stay with her” rather than joining his friend at the tavern (45). This assurance interrupts Ruth’s endless rubbing of salt into the skins. She stands, looks into the distance, and quietly says, “Tshepang,” meaning “hope” or “saviour” (45). In Simon, Foot-Newton offers audiences a new vision of masculinity and humanity for South Africa, significantly from a black male perspective.

Whereas in *Tshepang*, Simon is key to challenging stereotypes of men and violence in South Africa, in Foot-Newton’s second play, *Karoo Moose* (2009), “the key redemptive quality,” as critic Brent Meersman has observed, “lies in its format. Each performer in the ensemble acts several roles. . . . In playing male and female, adult and infant roles, the actors through their performances deconstruct and debunk the patriarchal constructions of black masculinity.”<sup>41</sup> *Karoo Moose* is much less forgiving than *Tshepang* in its exploration of violence and the abuse of children in contemporary South Africa, but it gives the female protagonist Thozama far greater agency than Ruth, who is both silent and burdened by guilt.

The play centers on Jonas and his family: his daughters Thozama and Quinnie and son Thabo, who are tormented by the gangsters Khola and David, and the children’s grandmother, Grace. Jonas’s family is paralleled by the white van Wyk family, for whom Grace works. The daughter of the van Wyks, Sarah, has committed suicide because her father

has sexually abused her, and the van Wyks's son Brian befriends Thozama. The play frames violence against racial injustice, as Mr. van Wyk accidentally kills Jonas's wife but is not held accountable. Jonas's desperation is such that he gambles with gangsters who then threaten him with violence until he finally agrees to give them his fifteen-year-old daughter in lieu of the money he owes them.

Foot-Newton uses ritual to suggest the hidden causes of violence and child abuse, offering an exorcism of sorts, but instead of presenting a final celebration of communal values, *Karoo Moose* issues a warning if the audience does not take note and act. At the start of the play, the actors "ritualistically enter the space one by one," carrying objects that will be used metaphorically during the performance: a net, a beer bottle, a belt, a cabbage, a wheelbarrow, moose horns, a washing pail, and a drum.<sup>42</sup> They walk in a circle, ritually preparing the space and the audience. The frightened moose, which is not indigenous to South Africa, represents the unknown onto which people project their fears: the children speculate as to whether it "eats children" (9, 22); Grace insists that it heralds "disease, drought, fire" and that "[i]t's going to eat our lives" (9); Mrs. van Wyk accuses it of eating a neighbor's Scottish terrier (12); and the narrator promises a frightening story of "the young girl Thozama and the wild, unimaginable and terrifying beast" (7-8). This animal embodies all the social and economic problems that facilitate oppression and violence against all in this society—men, women, and children.

Foot-Newton engages her audience with what is unspeakable through symbolic objects that evoke visceral affective responses without realistically re-enacting the violence, as is most evident in the symbolic performance that signifies Thozama's rape. Before the rape, Thozama's father Jonas and the gangsters Khola and David are watching soccer together, a pastime associated with the performance of male identity. After being violently threatened by the men, Jonas calls Thozama into the room and Khola gives her a roll of

humbugs—an appropriate signifier of impending child abuse, suggesting the familiar warning to children not to take sweets from strangers. Khola then kicks a drum, representing tradition, out of the way, puts Thozama into a washing pail, takes up his net, which could be either a fishing net or a goal net, and undoes his belt. He covers Thozama with the net and then he, David, Jonas, and a fourth actor play soccer around her, shouting, “Pass! Substitute! etc.” (28). They take off their shirts as the game intensifies and start taking shots at Thozama’s body with the ball, as if aiming for the goal posts. She cringes like a frightened animal. Towards the end of the scene, they start singing “Shosoloza,” a song commonly sung at soccer matches. Ironically, the song is about news coming with the trains carrying migrant workers from faraway places. The song thus suggests some of the antecedents of South Africa’s violence, as people were dislocated from their homes and communities to live in the harsh conditions of mine compounds, where women became objects to satisfy men’s sexual needs.

Foot-Newton parallels Thozama’s story with that of sixteen-year-old Sarah van Wyk, who hanged herself because her father—the farmer who killed Thozama’s mother—“used her like a goat” (39). Through this parallel, the play shifts the discourse on sexual violence away from issues of race to underlying issues of male hegemony, the performance of power, and the control of women. The men justify themselves to Jonas by saying that “someone has to teach her to be a woman” (27), and Jonas denies his culpability by accusing Thozama of “asking for it, it was your fault, walking around here like a slut” (34). The relationship between rape and normative female behavior is made clear later in the play when Thozama warns Khola to stay away from her younger sister after seeing her with a roll of humbugs and when he punishes her outspokenness by stealing and raping her baby.

The community as a whole refuses to act on the children’s behalf: Thozama’s grandmother Grace simply hands her an adult’s dress and tells her, “You are a woman now”

(30), suggesting the inevitability of the experience of rape for a girl. Similarly, Grace and Mrs. van Wyk either pretend that Sarah's abuse "didn't happen," or they say that it was "God's will"; as Grace explains, "The pain is too much. We try to forget" (41). Thozama, however, challenges the silences and cycles of violence and abuse, insisting: "We shouldn't be quiet about these things" (41). It is the children who revolt and throw the chopped cabbage, which represents Thozama's rape, at the moose before Thozama slits its throat, cooks it, and eats it, "while the boys stare at Thozama, the blood, the knife" (32). This act empowers Thozama to stand up to her father the next day and then later to the gangsters when she "ritualistically calls on the MOOSE by smearing her body with wet earth," a signifier of preparing for participation in a ritual in South Africa, and then "takes on the power of the beast" to challenge Khola (60). Significantly, her father comes to her aid and takes responsibility for Khola's death, thereby redeeming himself. This ritualistic confrontation suggests that we can and must challenge cycles of violence and helplessness and defend ourselves and our families. The play strongly argues that change is possible. Just as the white policeman Brian has rebuilt a scrap car and taught Thozama to drive, and just as their cross-racial relationship blooms, so other changes are possible. The closest *Karoo Moose* comes to a final valedictory celebration, however, is in the image of the children of the village, represented by sunflowers dressed in bright clothing, waving goodbye to us from the back of a truck. They are united in their rejection of abuse and the play ends with the warning that if the adults will not protect them, they will leave and the village will die.

Foot-Newton's third play, *Reach!*, references child abuse, but its focus is on wider post-apartheid issues, asking what other things we need to "unthink" in order to achieve *ubuntu*. Realist in style, *Reach!* ponders unemployment, racial prejudice, children losing parents to HIV/AIDS, and parents losing their children to crime or emigration. Above all, it is about fear. As the central character Marion says, "It's a pathology really, fear"—a "[s]tuck

feeling. A paralysis.”<sup>43</sup> This feeling is inspired by the sense that life in South Africa is precarious and that violence is ubiquitous, an idea that is further explored through the character Solomon, a young unemployed man who witnessed Marion’s son’s murder. Solomon explains that he remained silent because he feared that the murderers “would have sent their friends to kill me. Hang me, or burn me, or rape my sister or even my grandmother. They are like dogs that take the meat from the table. They feel nothing” (62). Solomon’s silence has resulted in both him and Marion being ill, but as both characters overcome their fear and speak to one another, they are able to progress: Solomon gets a job and Marion plans a visit to her daughter in Australia. *Reach!* thus extends Foot-Newton’s earlier explorations of how people can overcome racial, generational, and even traumatic distances by revising the principles they have set and live by, reaching out to one another as human beings despite cultural differences, preferences, and memories. Ultimately, the play suggests that if we refuse to be paralysed by fear, we can overcome it and the various divisions of the past.

Foot-Newton’s and Farber’s power as playwrights lies in their ability to engage with post-apartheid South Africa’s complex realities and to acknowledge the legacies of the past without suggesting that those legacies are inescapable or inevitable. They compassionately explore the reasons for silence and violence, but call for these patterns to be challenged and changed by our acknowledgement of the humanity of each individual. In this way, they exemplify André Brink’s view that “[a]rtists . . . are not agents of power, but campaigners for invisible values no human being can live without.”<sup>44</sup> Farber and Foot-Newton provide ways for audiences to engage with disavowed or contested subjects in the context of South Africa’s renegotiation of its history, including its gender politics. In facilitating the contemplation of what is unspeakable, they enable the rehearsal of different ways of being and interacting and

thus of achieving *Ubuntu*, inviting us to become fully human, despite previous inhuman experiences, by recognising others as human too.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Taylor, "Reform, Perform: Sincerity and the Ethnic Subject of History," *South African Theatre Journal* 22 (2008): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Image, 1999), 31. The concept is further explained by Ramose B. Mogobe in *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999) and his two essays "The Ethics of *Ubuntu*" and "The Philosophy of *Ubuntu* and *Ubuntu* as Philosophy," in *Philosophy from Africa*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 324-330 and 230-238 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Final Report*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1998), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Taylor, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Performed in 1999, unpublished.

<sup>6</sup> Performed in 1999, unpublished.

<sup>7</sup> Temple Hauptfleisch, "The Background: Reza de Wet and the South African Literary Establishment," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 9, No. 1 (1999): 55.

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<sup>8</sup> Among the women who have impacted South African theatre are Vanessa Cooke, Reza de Wet, Fatima Dike, Susan Pam Grant, Juanita Finestone, Jeanne Goosen, Janice Honeyman, Phyllis Klotz, Gcina Mhlope, Muthal Naidoo, Jennie Reznik, Irene Stephanou, Janet Suzman, Clare Stopford, and Jane Taylor. New post-apartheid playwrights include Nadine Naidoo, Krijay Govender, Devi Sarinjei, and Malika Ndlovu, as well as Yael Farber and Lara Foot-Newton. Relatively few of these women are published, however, and, with the exception of Dike, none of them are black. This situation may be due to the fact that many women work in community-based theatre such as the Mothertongue project (<http://www.mothertongue.co.za/>), the Zanendaba Institute of African Storytellers (<http://www.zanendaba.co.za/about.html>), and the Sibikwa Arts Centre. These community-based projects focus on embodied and oral forms of theatre that is collaboratively created and in which the text is only one dimension.

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Gouws, *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Moffett, “‘These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them’: Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, No. 1 (March 2006): 129.

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in Amanda Gouws, ed., *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Miki Flockemann, “On Not Giving Up: An Interview with Fatima Dike,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 9, No. 1 (1999): 19, 24.

<sup>13</sup> These dates indicate first performances.

<sup>14</sup> Yael Farber, foreword, *Molara* (London: Oberon Books, 2008)7.

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<sup>15</sup> “A History of the Text and Production Development,” in Yael Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa: A Woman in Waiting; Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise; He Left Quietly* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 89.

<sup>16</sup> Yael Farber, *Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise*, in Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa: A Woman in Waiting; Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise; He Left Quietly* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 91-2; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Isherwood, “‘Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise’: Apartheid’s Private Pain Becomes Group Art,” *New York Times* 26 July 2006, available at [http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/07/26/theater/reviews/26dove.html?\\_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1349444682-cYGjGj/jw3hvUJCURlPdKA](http://theater2.nytimes.com/2006/07/26/theater/reviews/26dove.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1349444682-cYGjGj/jw3hvUJCURlPdKA) (accessed 4 October 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Adrienne Sichel, “Remembering and Healing,” *The Star*, 3 July 2001, available at <http://www.farberfoundry.com/amajuba-press.html> (accessed 4 October 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York/ London: Penguin Books, 1994), 252.

<sup>20</sup> Abrahams is a South African novelist who lived in exile in Britain and Jamaica. This novel chronicles four generations of a Jamaican family and their experiences with racism.

<sup>21</sup> Farber, *He Left Quietly*, in Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa: A Woman in Waiting; Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise; He Left Quietly* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 221, 222; subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “*He Left Quietly*,” *Irish Times*, 29 November 2002, available at <http://www.farberfoundry.com/he-left-quietly-press.html> (accessed 4 October 2012).



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<sup>23</sup> Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of the Truth Commission* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Yael Farber, interview with Amanda Stuart Fisher, in Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa: A Woman in Waiting; Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise; He Left Quietly* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>27</sup> Yael Farber, director's note for *Amajuba*, in Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa: A Woman in Waiting; Amajuba: Like Doves We Rise; He Left Quietly* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 92.

<sup>28</sup> Fiona C. Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 175n4, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Farber describes her role as writer as being to “transport” an audience “from indifference to empathy, from their own limited perspective to deep inside the interior landscape of another person’s world,” (interview, *Theatre as Witness*, 20).

<sup>30</sup> Jo Caird, interview with Peter Hayes, “Brief Encounter With ... *Ncamisa! Kiss the Women*,” 8 October 2010, available at <http://www.whatsonstage.com/interviews/theatre/off-west+end/E8831285243428/Brief+Encounter+With+...+Ncamisa!+Kiss+the+Women+.htm>, (accessed 14 May 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Farber’s plays thus expand the use of verbatim testimony in South African protest theatre beyond signaling veracity and articulating silenced or disavowed experiences in a dangerous political context. For a more detailed analysis of verbatim theatre in the South African context, see Yvette Hutchison, “Post-1990s Verbatim Theatre in South Africa: Exploring an African Concept of ‘Truth,’” in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed.

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Carol Martin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61-71 and “Verbatim Theatre in South Africa: ‘Living theatre in a person’s performance,’” in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209-223.

<sup>32</sup> Lara Foot-Newton, author’s note, *Tshepang* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2005), vii.

<sup>33</sup> Moffett, “These Women,” 132-35.

<sup>34</sup> Lara Foot-Newton, *Tshepang: The Third Testament* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2005), 19; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>35</sup> Tony Hamburger, “*Tshepang*: A Morality Play?” in Lara Foot-Newton, *Tshepang: The Third Testament* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2005), 8

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard Marx, designer’s note, *Tshepang*, x.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Robins, “At the limits of spatial governmentality: a message from the tip of Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 23, No. 4 (2002): 671.

<sup>38</sup> Marx, designer’s note, x-xi.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>40</sup> Hamburger, “*Tshepang*: A Morality Play?” 4.

<sup>41</sup> Brent Meersman, “*Karoo Moose* (Baxter Theatre),” 14 October 2007, available at <http://realreview.co.za/tag/lara-foot-newton/> (accessed 6 October 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Lara Foot-Newton, *Karoo Moose* (London: Oberon, 2009), 7; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.

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<sup>43</sup> Lara Foot-Newton, *Reach!* in *At this Stage*, ed. Greg Homann (Witwatersrand University Press, 2009), 40, 42; subsequent references to the play will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>44</sup> André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing in South Africa* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1996), 58.